

Classical Series 6 - Program Notes

Sergei Prokofiev

April 23, 1891 – March 4, 1953

Romeo and Juliet Suite No. 2

Today, Prokofiev's *Romeo and Juliet* is an acknowledged classic, but it was not always so. Here's the story in the composer's own words: "In the latter part of 1934, the Kirov Theatre at Leningrad approached me about composing a ballet. They suggested Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* as a subject. But the Kirov backed out, and I signed instead a contract with the Bolshoi Theatre in Moscow. In 1935, I worked out a scenario for the work, consulting with the choreographer on questions of ballet technique. When I presented it to them, however, they declared it 'impossible to dance,' and they broke the contract." What was the problem? Prokofiev had composed a happy ending for one of the most poignant tragedies ever written! What? When asked why, he said, "There was quite a fuss about our attempt to give *Romeo and Juliet* a happy ending. The reason was purely choreographic: living people can dance, the dying cannot." Can you hear Shakespeare protesting from his grave? Chalk this one up to the it-seemed-like-a-good-idea-at-the-time dustbin.

In any event, Prokofiev rewrote the ending to go with the original story. But by now, Russia ballet troupes considered it to be damaged goods. Prokofiev called his orphan, "rather unlucky." Undaunted, he succeeded in arranging a premiere in Czechoslovakia in 1938. Its foreign success convinced the Kirov to give it another chance, but the difficulties continued. The dancers had trouble with Prokofiev's subtle changes of rhythm because they could not hear some of his delicate music. A shouting match ensued, with Prokofiev yelling, "I know what you want, you want drums, not music!" The dancers invited him to sit with them on the stage, and after he did, he relented and rewrote the passages about which they were complaining. The Bolshoi later staged the ballet in 1946, and since then, it has been a beloved work.

During his travails, Prokofiev extracted two instrumental Suites from the ballet. Tonight, we'll hear Suite No. 2, in seven movements. The music begins with powerful foreboding chords, a prelude warning that this tale will not end well. Why? Because of the toxic arrogance of the two feuding families of which the star crossed young lovers are the offspring – Romeo of the Montagues and Juliet of the Capulets. Prokofiev introduces these antagonistic tribes with the Dance of the Knights. The music has all the grace – but none of the majesty – of retired Barnum and Bailey pachyderms. The flute ushers Juliet into this pompous display. Notice how this 13 year-old girl is tentative among her elders.

The second movement explores Juliet's many moods. She begins as a light hearted girl of subline unspoiled beauty. Listen carefully, however, as Prokofiev's music magically transforms Juliet from an innocent girl into a young woman. He uses the cello, the harp, and the celesta to capture this transformation. At one point, Juliet stands transfixed before a mirror as she contemplates the changes in her flowering body. The caterpillar has become a butterfly.



Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky

May 7, 1840 – November 6, 1893

Romeo and Juliet overture-fantasy

Tchaikovsky's *Romeo and Juliet* is a radiant symphonic poem featuring three elements of Shakespeare's timeless tragedy. The first is Friar Laurence, a kindly man of the cloth who seeks a solution to *Romeo and Juliet*'s predicament. The second is their families' prideful hostility; and the third is the young lovers' ardent passion for each other. Tchaikovsky clothes each element in a distinctive theme.

The piece opens with Friar Laurence in his lair. The bassoons and the clarinets combine to create a church-like atmosphere as the good Friar searches for answers to the enmity of the feuding families. Dark ominous sounds from the basses foreshadow doom. Four harmonized chords repeatedly reach for the heavens, punctuated by the harp.

The Montagues and the Capulets shatter the calm of the Friar's deliberations and start a mindless street brawl. Cymbals suggest the clashing of swords as a fierce battle rages throughout the orchestra.

As the combatants exhaust themselves, the voice of the English horn announces the composition's ravishing love theme, a soaring yearning instrumental aria picked up by the woodwinds and horns. Could the flutes be fair Juliet? Sheer ecstasy billows from the stage.

Now that Tchaikovsky has introduced us to the three elements of his fantasia, he weaves them together in a brilliant



development section. Tchaikovsky's compositional genius is in full display. The three main themes clash, interact, and compete, just as they do in Shakespeare's drama. The music erupts and blazes with fury and raw volcanic emotion.

But alas, all is for naught. The Friar's scheme to deceive the arrogant families backfires when Romeo mistakes Juliet's drug induced sleep for death. Distraught, he commits suicide. Juliet awakes to find Romeo dead, so she takes her own life. Driven by a timpani roll, the music comes to a dead halt.

To convey the emotional essence of this tragedy, Tchaikovsky now transforms the love theme into a despairing lament, a funeral march in a minor key. Notice the palpitating timpani signaling death.

What more is there to say? Human foibles and folly have wrought their deadly malevolence. A chastened Friar Laurence makes a brief appearance, and the music ends abruptly as did Romeo's and Juliet's young lives. Death here is oblivion, not Wagnerian transfiguration.

A glooming peace this morning brings;
The sun, for sorrow, will not show its head:
Go hence, to have more talk of these sad things;
Some shall be pardon'd, and some punished:
For never was there a story of more woe
Than this of Juliet and her Romeo.

Leonard Bernstein

August 25, 1918 – October, 1990

Symphonic Dances from West Side Story

Created in 1957, *West Side Story* became an overnight Broadway hit. Working with choreographer Jerome Robbins and lyricist Stephen Sondheim, Bernstein updated Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, transplanted the plot into the contemporary West Side of Manhattan, and supercharged it with the expressive power of music and dance. He replaced the Montagues and the Capulets with two warring street gangs, the Puerto Rican Jets and the White Sharks, and Romeo and Juliet with star-crossed lovers, Tony and Maria.

Bernstein's *Symphonic Dances* is a suite extracted in 1961 from the score. It features high-octane music – especially dance music – of every stripe. There is a nine-part narrative to the piece, best described in the liner notes to the original CD: "The Prologue depicts the rising violence between the Jets and the Sharks. A dream sequence envisions them joined in peaceful friendship Somewhere beyond the confines of the city, in a realm of space, air, and sun (Scherzo). Real life breaks in: at a high school dance where the gangs compete (Mambo), the young lovers, Tony and Maria, see one another for the first time, dance together (Cha-Cha), and speak (Meeting Scene). The Jets try to suppress their nervous violence (Cool Fugue); it breaks out in a Rumble where the rival gang leaders are killed. The Finale is based on Maria's *I Have a Love* and memorializes Tony and the other gang men who have died with a final quote from Somewhere."

Although no one would mistake Bernstein's music for Beethoven's, Bernstein used a compositional technique made famous by the Great Master in his Fifth Symphony: the use of a short catchy musical motto. In Beethoven's case, it was the first four notes of the Symphony, three shorts and a descending long. Bernstein uses three notes – including a "tritone" – to accomplish the same effect, the three notes that open the song *Maria*. As in the case of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, these three notes – in Bernstein's words – "pervade the whole piece, inverted, done backwards." Okay, so what's a "tritone" and why is this information important? A tritone is an unstable dissonant interval, here C major rising to F# major, that has been used for centuries to indicate serious trouble. In the Middle Ages, composers called it "Diabolus in Musica," or the devil in music. Bernstein surreptitiously uses this disquieting interval to foreshadow Tony and Maria's tragic fate. Clever.

Notwithstanding its success, *West Side Story* lost its bid for a Best Show Tony Award to Meredith Wilson's *The Music Man*. The inevitable movie that followed, however, won the Oscar for Best Picture. Go Lenny!

